

National Infantry Museum Honors MOH Recipient



CARRIE MCLEROY

Editor's Note: *Medal of Honor recipient SPC Ross McGinnis, who was killed 4 December 2006 in Iraq when he covered a grenade with his body to save the lives of four others, was the first infantryman honored with a plaque on the outside wall of the National Infantry Museum. The plaque was unveiled during a ceremony on 12 June.*

McGinnis was the second U.S. Soldier to receive the medal for actions in Operation Iraqi Freedom and a special Web site has been created by the Soldiers Media Center at www.army.mil/medalofhonor/McGinnis. The site includes a profile on the 1st Infantry Division Soldier; battlescape, background on the medal, video news reports and a number of other resources.

Story of a Hero

McGinnis began his transformation from scrawny boy to standout Soldier at 17, enlisting in the Army through the Delayed Entry Program in June 2004. Although by and large an average student, McGinnis was not interested in academics and spent his teen years struggling to get by.

"He put us through our trials, definitely. From little up, he liked to push the limits," his mother, Romaine, said. "You never knew what was going to come out of his mouth or out of his actions."

In high school, McGinnis never made the honor roll or played sports. According to teachers, he made his mark, but in ways that were uniquely Ross.

"He stood out, but just by bits and pieces," said Franki Sheatz, McGinnis's 9th and 11th-grade French teacher at Keystone High School. "When he stood out, a lot of times it was because of his wit, or because he was trying to get away with something. He never did any more or less than a lot of the other kids I had in class, although he was charming in his little way."

His parents and teachers agreed that the catalyst that sparked a change in McGinnis was his decision to join the military.

"He came to us and said he wanted join the Army, and we accepted that," said McGinnis's father Tom. "The way we looked at it was that he had no intention of going to school, and there really aren't very good jobs for a person (who) doesn't have higher education. The Army was an opportunity for him to be able to get the kind of education that he wanted."

The younger McGinnis had aspirations of one day becoming an automotive technician. The Army, in his eyes, was a means to that end — a place where he could serve his country as an infantryman, but receive an off-duty education that would prepare him for a future career.

McGinnis left his rural Pennsylvania town for basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., within days of graduating from Keystone High School, just before his 18th birthday. During the first stage of training, McGinnis's parents received a phone call from him. "He



U.S. Army photo

SPC Ross McGinnis was the first infantryman honored with a plaque on the outside wall of the National Infantry Museum.

said the first week was boring, a lot of, 'Hurry up and wait,'" Romaine said. In subsequent calls, he conveyed his increasing enthusiasm.

"He really liked the physical part of the training. Ross wasn't one to push a pencil. He wanted to be actively involved," she said. "He was really excited about the weapons training. While in Boy Scouts, they went to a shooting range once and he really liked that, so it didn't surprise me when he said he wanted to go with the gunner position."

According to reports from fellow Soldiers, McGinnis's interest in weapons was crafted into a skill set that would serve him well in his position as a .50-caliber machine gunner.

Soldier's Soldier

McGinnis finished basic and then infantry training in Georgia and headed home to Knox on leave before reporting to his first assignment in Germany. He arrived in Schweinfurt, Germany in November 2005 and reported to 1st Platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment with an influx of Soldiers as the company was preparing for its upcoming mission to Iraq. According to retired SSG Ian Newland, he immediately became an instrumental part of the team.

"His personality and humor made him stand out. He was the comedian out of everybody," Newland, a squad leader with 1st Platoon at the time, said. "You could be having the worst day in the field, or the worst day in the rear 'D', and Ross would come in a



room and everybody would be laughing within three minutes.”

Ross was known as the funny guy with an infectious smile from the day he joined the unit, Newland said. “I have this image of him, even today. We were in Germany and he was up on a .50-cal gunning. We had been doing a convoy for probably around eight hours. I was in the vehicle behind him and he turned around and smiled at my gunner. His teeth were just covered in dirt from being up on the gun, but he’s just still smiling ear to ear. That right there was just him.”

His gifts extended beyond platoon funny man according to his leaders, who said he was also a top-notch Soldier.

“I had four platoons, roughly 190 Soldiers in my command. There were certain Soldiers that would stand out. McGinnis was definitely one of those Soldiers,” said MAJ Michael Baka, commander of C Company from June 2005 to March 2007. “He was one of the top members of his platoon. His platoon sergeant handpicked him to serve as the machine gunner on his Humvee, which speaks highly of his performance.” McGinnis excelled in weaponry, marksmanship, and physical training as well.

He was also a born leader, Newland said, who knew how to read and react to different Soldiers in a variety of situations. “People responded to him, and he knew how to respond to people’s personalities and characters. That is one of the hardest traits to build as a leader, to be able to adapt, per Soldier. He had that naturally.”

Adamiyah

The first unit from the battalion on the ground, C Company arrived in Iraq on 4 August 2006, following a week of training in Kuwait. Combat Outpost Apache in Adamiyah, a northeast section of Baghdad steeped in sectarian violence, was to be their home. The area had lacked a U.S. presence for eight months.

“There were a lot of kidnappings, killings and a lot of enemy activity in our sector,” Baka said. Insurgent attacks, sniper fire, grenade contact and IEDs were all part of daily life in Adamiyah.

In October, just two months into the deployment, C Company had already lost two of its Soldiers: SSG Garth Sizemore to a

sniper’s bullet, and SGT Willsun Mock in an IED explosion. In November, after Saddam Hussein was found guilty of crimes against humanity, the battalion fought a five-hour battle against enemy insurgents who attacked the outpost.

By December, the men of 1-26 were battle hardened, but McGinnis had a way of taking the focus off the tragedies.

“He was constantly motivating and positive all the time, and that really helped the platoon out a lot. He was key in our platoon because of that,” Newland said. “Right after we lost SGT Sizemore, we were all really shocked — it really hit home. And then SGT Mock — we were getting pretty depressed. But Ross, he knew how to take our attention off of that — all of us — from senior leaders to your private Joe. He knew how to respond.”

That Fateful Day

It was 4 December 2006, and 1st Platoon was gearing up to patrol the streets of Adamiyah and deliver a 250-kilowatt generator to provide increased electricity to the area. Insurgents had been lobbing grenades at vehicles on patrols, and in response the platoon had honed its reaction skills through a series of training scenarios Newland likened to fire drills. He had experienced such an incident nine days earlier on patrol, but the grenade turned out to be a dud.

As they rolled out of Apache’s gates, the men in the six-vehicle patrol felt up to their mission, despite ever-present dangers, as they did each time they patrolled Adamiyah’s streets, Baka said. “We had only just left the gate. We were moving deliberately down the streets, and had just taken a left-hand turn on a main road just south of Abu Hanifah mosque.”

Baka’s was the fourth vehicle in the order of movement. The platoon sergeant’s vehicle was the last, and McGinnis manned its machine gun.

According to official statements from SGT Lyle Buehler (the driver), SFC Cedric Thomas (platoon sergeant and truck commander), SPC Sean Lawson (medic) and Newland, McGinnis sat in the gunner strap, .50-cal at the ready, facing backward to ensure rear security. Buehler and Thomas rode in the front of the vehicle, and Newland and Lawson in the back.



SPC Ross McGinnis used his body to cover a grenade, which had been thrown by an insurgent into his vehicle.

As the sixth vehicle made the left turn, Baka heard a loud explosion. His initial thought was that a grenade had exploded outside his own up-armored Humvee. Baka’s machine gunner got on the intercom and said, “Sir, it looks like our last vehicle got hit.” All four of the Humvee’s doors had been blown off. Baka ordered his vehicle and the one behind it to turn around. “Once I saw the vehicle I knew right away that we had a hand grenade that had entered the vehicle, and that we had a large number of casualties,” he said.

Baka got a new driver for the crippled but still running Humvee, and they headed back to Apache. He said he knew the Soldiers had sustained injuries, but did not know to what extent until arriving at the outpost. He didn’t know that McGinnis was dead, or that he died a hero.

Thomas pulled Baka aside within minutes of arriving at Apache and said, “Sir, McGinnis saved our lives today.” Then he told the story that would support that statement.

An insurgent on a nearby rooftop threw a grenade at McGinnis’s vehicle. He unsuccessfully attempted to deflect the grenade, and it entered the vehicle behind him. McGinnis quickly announced, “Grenade!”

According to official accounts by survivors, McGinnis stood up and was preparing to jump out of the vehicle. “That is what the machine gunner is supposed to



do,” Baka said. “He’s supposed to announce the grenade, give a fair amount of time for people in the vehicle to react, and then he’s supposed to save himself. No one would have blamed him if he did that, because that is what he was trained to do.”

This time, the 19-year-old Soldier would not heed his training.

The other Soldiers asked, “Where?” McGinnis’s response: “It’s in the truck!”

McGinnis saw the grenade sitting on the radio mount behind him and realized the others weren’t aware of its location. They were combat-locked in the Humvee and would not have time to escape. As he gave his response, he pushed the gunner strap out from under him and laid his back on top of the grenade. It detonated, killing him instantly.

Buehler and Thomas received minor shrapnel injuries, and Lawson suffered a perforated eardrum and concussion. Newland received more of the blast and was severely wounded, but would survive. “The driver and truck commander I am certain would have been killed if that blast had taken full effect,” Baka said.

Newland, who was medically retired because of his injuries, was able to protect himself because of McGinnis’s warning. “He put his arm over his face, which I think saved his life, because a piece of shrapnel hit him in the arm. Another hit him in the chin and some in his legs. But he’s alive today,” Baka added.

Within 24 hours of McGinnis’s sacrifice, Baka gathered statements from the survivors and wrote the recommendation for his Medal of Honor. He received the Silver Star, the third-highest award for valor, as an interim award.

Magnitude of his Sacrifice

“The first time it became full magnitude for me was when we were loading his body onto the helicopter for the hero flight — that’s standard,” Baka said. The unit held a small, informal ceremony and Baka led them in a prayer, as there was no chaplain at the combat outpost. As the helicopter flew away, they saluted the young man who laid down his life so the men he loved and served with could live.

“We have hero flights for every Soldier, and every Soldier that gives his life’s a hero. But McGinnis, in my mind, is the definition of hero,” Baka said. “From this day forward if anyone ever asks me to define the word hero, I would simply tell them the story of SPC Ross McGinnis and the actions he took that day to save four of his brothers.”

For the men who survived, each breath they take serves as a reminder of McGinnis’s courageous sacrifice.

“By all means I should have died that day. He gave me a life that he can’t have now,” Newland said. “There isn’t a single day or

hour that goes by that I don’t take in everything. The smell of my daughter’s hair, the smile my son gives me out of nowhere, the soft touch of my wife’s hand just driving in the car. Normally those are things people might take for granted. I’m able to appreciate and have these things all over again, every day, every hour, because of what Ross did.”

Regular Guy Who Did an Extraordinary Thing

Tom McGinnis is still adjusting to the fact that his son, whom he described as average, often to the point of being an underachiever, is receiving the Medal of Honor.

“I never pictured what a Medal of Honor winner is supposed to look like, but I guess I would think of somebody like a John Wayne character in the movies, where the guy is macho and tough and fear is nothing,” Tom said. “But of course, that’s not anywhere close to what my son, Ross, was like. Although he had very little fear in him, he wasn’t a tough, macho type of person. He was just like you and me.”

Remembering Ross McGinnis

For his brothers in arms, the best way to remember McGinnis is to tell the story of what he did for them 4 December 2006, and to live their lives every day with purpose and meaning.

“I think for me to thank him, is to do everything I can to live my life to the fullest,” Newland said. “Because if he can have courage like that, if he can give up his 19-year-old life, then I can live the rest of my life, however long it is, to every day’s fullest.”

The McGinnis’s remember their son as an average kid who made mistakes but found purpose and direction as he became a young man, just like many other kids out of high school. For them, it is difficult to think of Ross as the larger-than-life character others may see him as because of his sacrifice.

“I’ve had people ask me if I’d like a book or a movie written about him, and I say, ‘No.’ They would have to write so much into this to make it readable or viewable that Ross wouldn’t even be in there. It wouldn’t be him,” Tom said. “It would be somebody else, because his life was dull, boring and nothing to write about. He was just an ordinary person who, when it came time, did the right thing, and that’s the most important thing to remember about him.”

(This story was written from videotaped interviews of the sources. SFC Pete Mayes and SSG Ray Flores of Soldiers Radio and Television conducted the interviews.)



Courtesy photo

The plaque honoring SPC Ross McGinnis is posted outside the entrance to the National Infantry Museum.